

“JESHURUN WAXED FAT”

I

IT was an evening at Chet McAusland's farm, on the hill above Fraternity. Chet and I had been all day in the woodcock covers with the dogs, Reck and Frenchy, and with the ghost of old Tantrybogus going on before us. We had come home to a heaping supper of fried woodcock, boiled potatoes, sweet salt pork, squash, doughnuts, cheese, and Mrs. McAusland's incomparable biscuits, with pie to follow after. When Chet's chores were done, we went down to Will Bissell's store to brag about our day's bag and get the mail; and now we were at home again, and Chet, to confirm his recollection in connection with an ancient catch of trout of which he spoke, brought from the desk in the front room an old leather-backed account-book and conned its yellowing pages.

When he had found that which he sought, he laid the book down between us, and as he talked, I picked it up and looked it through, idly. The covers were worn and ragged with age, and there was a flap upon the one that entered a slit upon the other, holding the book securely closed. The pages were filled with entries in pencil or in pen, and some of these were concerned with matters of business concluded twenty years before; and

some recorded the results of days with rod or gun; while here and there, dropped at random, were paragraphs or pages devoted to casual incidents that had struck Chet's fancy through a space of forty years. On one such series I chanced, and read the entries through, first to myself, and then, with some amusement, aloud. They ran in this wise:

June 6, 1883. Jed was taken sick to-day with a pain in his stomach. He seems very weak. The old man won't last long.

March, 1887. The old man's stomach is bothering him again. He has to stay in bed right along.

September 2, 1892. Abbie Grant says Uncle Jed's pain is worse. He's not long for this world.

July, 1895. That pain in Uncle Jed's insides still hangs on. It will be the death of him.

August 2, 1898. Deborah Grant was here to-day. The old man still breathes.

May, 1900. Uncle Jed is still alive and kicking.

When I had finished reading these items aloud, Chet drew his chin back against his neck and laughed with that robust vigor which is characteristic of him; and I, without at all understanding the jest, nevertheless laughed in sympathy.

"But it seems to me," I suggested, "that the record ends here a bit abruptly. What happened to the old man, anyway?"

"That was old Uncle Jed Grant," Chet told me, tears of mirth in his eyes. "I could tell you things about Uncle Jed that 'u'd surprise you."

Mrs. McAusland called from the kitchen to warn me that if I didn't look out I'd get Chet started; but I reassured her, and bade Chet tell

on. That which follows is the substance of his telling.

II

This Jedidiah Grant, so Chet assured me, was by all odds the meanest man that ever dwelt in Fraternity, where to be mean and to be miserly are synonymous.

"Why," said Chet, "he was so mean he wouldn't let you see him laugh; fear it 'u'd tickle you." And he began to chuckle at some recollection, so that it was necessary to spur him before he would go on.

"I was thinking," he explained, "of the time Jed went down to Boston. Went to turn some gold into greenbacks. This was after the war, when the greenbacks was 'way down. Jed had made some money boot-legging in Bangor, and he see a chance to make some more. Trip didn't cost him a thing, because a couple of Boston men asked him to come down."

He had met these men in Bangor, it appeared.

"They 'lowed I uz a side-show," Jed told Chet. "I knowed they thought so, but long as they paid my way, I didn't mind. Went along down and did my business at the bank. Then they took me to supper at a tavern and tried to git me drunk; got drunk theirselves. Then we went to a show. Say, Chet, they was the funniest man in that show I ever see. I set between these two, and they kep' a-looking at me, and I was like to bust, I wanted to laugh so bad. I never did see such a funny man. But I didn't much as grin; it near killed me. Say, when I got

into bed that night, I like' to died laughing, just thinking about him. But they didn't know that."

"I asked him," Chet explained, "why he didn't want to laugh in the theater, and he says, 'I wouldn't give them two that much satisfaction.' So he saved it up till he got alone. That's how mean he was."

This man had been born in Fraternity, and his brother Nehemiah and his sisters Abigail and Deborah always lived in the town. No one of them was ever to marry. They were dwelling together in the house where their father and mother had lived when Jed came back to Fraternity and settled down to a business in usury, lending out money on iron-clad notes, and collecting on the nail. He was a timorous man, forever fearful lest by force or by stealth he be robbed of the tin box of paper that represented his fortune; therefore he hid the box ingeniously, sharing the secret with no living man.

Jed was already old, and his sixtieth birthday came in 1881. He had bought a little hillside farm, where he lived alone; but in that year his loneliness became oppressive to him, and he sought out his brother 'Miah with a proposal that he had carefully planned.

Before 'Miah's eyes old Jed spread out all the kingdoms of the world. That is to say, he showed his brother the tin box of notes, showed all his wealth to the other man. He was worth at this time twenty thousand dollars, a fortune in Fraternity.

"It's this a-way, 'Miah," he explained. "I'm a-getting old, and mighty feeble sometimes. Can't

do for myself like I used. I could hire somebody to take care of me, but that don't look just right. Seems like what I got ought to stay in the family, 'Miah. Don't it look that way to you?"

It did. 'Miah had no love for his brother; there was no basis for any such love, since Jed had gouged him as hungrily as he had gouged other men. Nevertheless, there was in Jed's money a powerful conciliatory factor, and 'Miah, though weaker, was as avaricious as the older man. He asked:

"What are you heading at, anyway?"

"This here, 'Miah," Jed replied. "You come on over here and fix to live with me and look out for me. You're younger than I be, and I ain't a well man, anyway. You do for me long as I live, and I'll fix it so you heir my prop'ty. Ain't that a right fair thing?"

'Miah did not consider over-long. The duties proposed to him were burdensome, but the rewards were proportionately great. He did insist on a formal will, which Jed drew and signed and delivered into 'Miah's custody. Thereafter the younger brother moved from the home farm, leaving the sisters to dwell there alone with a hired man for help, and came to live with the old miser.

Jed began almost at once to prosper on this care. He contributed to the support of the household nothing whatever.

"'Tain't in the bargain," he insisted when 'Miah complained. "And, besides," he added, "all I got is a-going to come to you." He contributed nothing, yet demanded everything: vic-

tuals of his choice and plenty of them, the daily paper to read, and a regular allowance of gin. He demanded these things, and got them. Passers used to see him sitting in the sun before the house door, as slothful as a serpent, his little black eyes twisting this way and that in a beady fashion that completed the likeness. He had been spare and thin; he began to put on flesh. But as the angles of his frame became more rounded, the edges of his tongue became keener, and he cut 'Miah with sharp words day by day.

'Miah was a spineless man; nevertheless the hour came when he rebelled. It is impossible to say how this ultimate dissension was begun; the sources of such quarrels are often lost in the flood of recriminations which arise from them. 'Miah, in a futile, shrill-voiced manner, lost his temper, but Jed did not. The older man goaded the other with edged words, observing with malign amusement his brother's rising anger, till 'Miah suddenly became silent, turned away, and without word began to gather his few belongings. Jed, having watched him for a time, asked:

"What you a-doing, 'Miah?"

"I got enough of you," 'Miah told him, sullenly. "I'm going back home."

Persisting in a stubborn silence, he continued his preparations all that morning; and Jed, at first jeering and incredulous, was forced to accept the other's intentions. It was in this crisis that he conceived the artifice that was to become a part of his life. 'Miah, in the bedroom, heard Jed groan; he paid no heed, and his brother

groaned again. This time the younger man came to the door and looked at Jed, suspiciously. The miser was bent forward in his chair, hugging himself and groaning more and more. 'Miah asked petulantly:

"What's the matter with you?" And Jed gasped, as though in agony:

"Git Doctor Crapo, 'Miah. I'm a-dying. I got a turrible pain in my stummick."

'Miah studied him; he said incredulously:

"It's belly-ache."

Jed wagged his wicked old head and groaned again.

"All right, 'Miah; but git the doctor, anyhow. I'm a-dying, sure."

There was always a chance that this might be true. 'Miah sent for the doctor, and Doctor Crapo, a young man then and not so wise as he would later be, questioned Jed, and took pulse and temperature, and said with some solemnity:

"I don't know. You've got no fever, but your heart is jumpy. I guess— Well, you're getting along, you know. If this pain is what you say, it's just the beginning of one of those ailments that come on old men sometimes. Nothing I can do for it at your age."

"It's a-killing me," Jed pleaded weakly, and the doctor said:

"Well, I can physic you, of course; but if it's just a stomach-ache, it will stop anyway, and if it's something worse, physic won't do a bit of good."

"This ain't no stummick-ache," said Jed and groaned again.

The doctor nodded, and he and 'Miah went out of the room together. 'Miah took this chance to ask:

"How about it, Doc?"

"May be bad," the doctor told him. "Looks like the beginning of one of those torturing deaths that some men die. Months, maybe years, of that pain, getting worse all the time. And—his heart is bad."

"He'll maybe die?"

"Might go any time," said Doctor Crapo, and drove away.

Now, this was in 1883. Chet McAusland had recorded the first appearance of that pain in the old note-book that I still held in my hand. The effect of Jed's artifice was that 'Miah did not, after all, desert his brother. Actuated by the avaricious thought that since he had endured three years of servitude for no return, he might as well endure another period, now that the reward was in sight, he stayed on at the little hill-side farm. The next spring he died and was laid away. Old Jed had read his brother well; he grinned to himself because he had been able to buy 'Miah's services with empty promises and nothing more, and the incident gave him confidence. He lived for a few months alone.

III

But in 1885 Jed's native sloth rebelled at the necessity for tending his own bodily needs, and he sent for his sister Abigail, who lived with Deborah on their father's farm—sent for Abbie,

and showed her, as he had showed 'Miah, that tin box of ugly treasure-trove.

"I'm a-getting feeble, Abbie," he told her, plaintively. "I'm too old to do for myself." With some inward appreciation of the satiric drama of the situation, he parroted the phrases he had used to 'Miah four years before. "I could hire somebody, but that don't look right. What I got ought to stay in the family. You come and take care of me."

This spinster sister was a humble little woman without strength or assertiveness; she yielded not from greed, but from lack of strength to resist his insistence, and so came to the farm upon the hill. Chet, telling the story, struck his fist upon his knee at the recollection.

"There's nobody knows what he put her through, and Deborah after her," he told me. "That old heathen had to have his own way or he'd raise holy Ned; and he got it. Abbie stood it longer than 'Miah; she never did kick up and threaten to leave him. But after two years she took sick and discouraged-like, and wanted to quit and go home. Then Jed he begun to say again how sick he was; made her fetch the doctor again."

This time, it appeared, Doctor Crapo had been wholly convinced of the miser's honesty.

"A pain like that," he told Jed, "is always a sure sign. I've seen them go. Specially men that eat heavy, like you do, and that get fat as they go along. You're going to have that pain the rest of your life, and worse all the time."

Abbie was in the room, and Jed asked plaintively:

"Hev I got to suffer like this here for days and days, Doc?"

"Months, maybe years," said the doctor, implacably.

Jed shook his head, turned wearily toward the wall.

"It ain't a-going to be that long," he assured them. "I can't stand it so long as you say."

Before this pitiable resignation, Abbie had neither the courage nor the selfishness to leave her brother alone; so she struggled on, tending the dying man. But five years later he was still alive, as venomous and as slothful as he had ever been, when Abigail at last gave way. She suffered what would have passed as a nervous breakdown in a woman of more sheltered life, and needed Jed's care far more than he needed hers. When she would have taken to her bed, however, Jed kept stubbornly to his, so that she drove herself meekly to her round of tasks, and wept with the agony of tight-wrung nerves. It was release when, in the following spring, she died. Jed grinned at the fact that her years of service had brought her no reward at all, and the day after the funeral he sent for Deborah.

IV

"By that time," Chet assured me, "everybody in town knowed about Uncle Jed and this pain of his, and from now on he talked about it more. You stop to see him any day, and he'd groan and

take on in a way that 'u'd surprise you. He stayed in bed all the time, in a room all shut up tight, reading his papers and drinking his gin and eating all the time. Deborah took good care of him; she was that kind of a woman. She had backbone, but she was built to take care of folks, and half the town had had her in when folks was sick. There was times when she threatened to leave him, but she never did, him always saying he was about to die."

There were skeptics, it appeared. Doctor Crapo himself was at last beginning to suspect the old miser's play-acting.

"If he'd had that pain all this time," he told Deborah, "he'd be howling with it night and day or dead long ago. He's a lazy hound; that's all, Miss Grant."

But Deborah would not altogether be convinced, and when Jed heard the doctor's words, he wagged his head and said pathetically:

"That's what I git for bearing it so brave'. If I'd yell and take on, you'd believe me; but because I keep my mouth shut and stand these torments, you think I'm lying."

So Deborah stayed with him. There was no avarice in her, but there was the instinct for service, and some trace of blood affection for this worthless brother, last of her kin alive. She gave him pitying and tender care, and the old man, in his slothful bed, fattened enormously, till it was scarcely possible for him to move at all. Yet in May, 1900, he was, as Chet had recorded, still alive and kicking; and in June of that year Deborah suddenly died.

V

This woman was loved in Fraternity, and with reason. To the funeral services in the little farmhouse came more men and women than could be crowded within doors. Jed, abed in the next room, listened to the minister's slow and reverent words with a derisive grin. One or two people came in to speak to him, charitably, as people do at such hours. There was an element of martyrdom about the woman's death that awed them, glorifying even the ugly ceremonies of the funeral.

Jed did not feel this at all. He was amusing himself with his own reflections, and as the service drew toward its end he became so absorbed in his own thoughts that he was not aware when the stirring of feet marked the departure of the little cortège. The last man and the last woman left the house to follow what was left of Deborah to her grave, and five minutes after they were gone Jed realized that he was alone.

Not at first sure of this, he called out; but no one answered. When he knew that he would not be overheard, the fat man began to chuckle and shake with mirth at thought of how he had tricked his brother and sisters; how, trading upon their avarice and their faint love for him, he had bought their lives with empty promises, never to be fulfilled.

But after a little this amusement passed; it gave way to a desire to talk to some one, share this jest with them. He called out once more, but no answer came to his call.

The realization that he was in fact utterly alone, the abrupt possibility that hereafter he would always be alone, with no tender hands to serve him, startled the old man, and somewhat affrighted him. He was aware of a tremor of fear at the prospect of the loneliness that lay ahead, and because he wished to reassure himself, give evidence that power still dwelt in him, he decided to get out of bed.

With some effort he pushed away the heavy coverlets with which he was accustomed to swaddle his vast body, and tried to swing his feet to the floor, lift his bulk from the bed. He struggled for an instant, then fell back with white face and staring eyes, and the sweat of fear upon his forehead.

For the first time in his life he had suddenly been stricken with a terrific pain in his bowels. He had never suffered this agony before, yet knew it for what it was; knew it for one of those shafts of anguish that presage months or years of torment, with no relief save a torturous death at the end.

He whispered, with stiff and horror-stricken lips, "I'm a-dying." This time he spoke truth. He had, in fact, at last begun to die.